

Browser

Information you can use

Engines accelerate

Web searches expand

Search engines keep struggling to keep up with the rapid expansion of the Web, which is closing in on 900 million pages. A recent study says the best engine, **Northern Light**, covered 86 percent of the pages. Earlier this month a Norwegian company, **Fast Search & Transfer**, claimed its new engine, **FAST Search**, has 200 million pages indexed and will have the entire Web indexed and searchable by next year. Try it at www.alltheweb.com. **Excite@home** said its new search engine, expected to be rolling this month, will have sifted through the entire Web, dumped useless sites and have a relevant index of 250 million pages.

Cyber-clipping

Coupons go online

More retailers are turning to cyberspace to promote their products or services. Some are posting **Val-Pak** coupons. **Val-Pak** Coupons at www.valpak.com offers 30,000 coupons good for products and services throughout the United States and Canada. The site breaks down the coupons into three categories: near your home zip code, near your work zip code or a wider area in your state. By punching in the appropriate zip code, the Internet site limits the coupons to those near you. You find something you like and you can print out a coupon good for a discount. Another coupon site is www.couponjambou.com.



More to stare at

A useful monitor frame

Here's an opportunity to spend more time staring at your computer. The **EEGO Desktop Environment** is an oval-shaped piece of plastic that fits over the front of your monitor to serve as a platform for Post-it, thumbtacked notes and handwritten scribbles. With an opening in the center for the computer screen, it has cutouts at the bottom. It's \$24.95 at www.eegomonitor.com.

Fuel up, log on

AOL wants to go along

Imagine filling your car with gas and gassing up at America Online chatroom at the same time. It could happen. AOL has teamed with **Radiant Systems Inc.**, a supplier of computerization and point-of-sale systems, with the idea of getting a foothold in places such as gas stations, gift shops and gas stations. For example, says Don Davis, chief operating officer of AOL Interactive Properties Group, within a couple of years you could pull up to a pump that has a monitor, swipe your credit card, get gasoline and log on to the Internet.

Net-size video

ViewCam compresses

Sharp Electronics Corp. (www.sharp-usa.com) has the first digital video camera with MPEG-4 data compression, which makes digital images small and practical for Internet distribution. The two-walled-size ViewCam model VN-E24 has a built-in, 1.8-inch liquid crystal display screen, a lens that rotates 270 degrees and a 4-megapixel SmartMedia memory card that can store up to 17 million of video.

Compiled from staff and wire reports.

DIGITAL EDITION
www.DemocratandChronicle.com

PERSONAL TECHNOLOGY

DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE, ROCHESTER, N.Y., SUNDAY, AUGUST 22, 1999 2E

Check the reliability factor

■ Your decision on which PC is the best buy should depend largely on how each brand performs.

How different brands stack up



Here's a quick summary of the reader surveys in *PC Magazine* and *PC World*. All names listed with an asterisk (*) also scored above average for consumers' likelihood to buy that brand again. They're listed alphabetically within each category.

PC Magazine

Home PCs
A: Dell*, IBM
B: Apple, Micron*, Quantex
C: Gateway*, Hewlett-Packard, NEC, Sony, Toshiba, ZEOS, mostly built
D: AST
E: Acer, Compaq, Packard Bell
Office PCs
A: Dell*, Hewlett-Packard, IBM
B: Gateway*, Micron*
C: Apple, Compaq, Digital, NEC, Toshiba, locally built
D: Acer, Packard Bell
E: AST
Laptops
A: IBM*, Sony*
B: Compaq, Dell*, Gateway*, Micron, Toshiba
C: Acer, Apple, Digital, Fujitsu, Hewlett-Packard, Hitachi, NEC
D: Texas Instruments, Windows
E: AST

PC World

Home PCs
Outstanding: none
Good: CyberMax*, Dell*, IBM, Micron*, Quantex*, Sony
Fair: Compaq, Gateway, Hewlett-Packard, NEC
Poor: AST, Packard Bell
Unacceptable: Acer
Office PCs
Outstanding: none
Good: Dell*, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, NEC
Fair: Acer, AST, Compaq, Gateway, Micron
Poor: Packard Bell
Laptops
Outstanding: none
Good: Dell*, Gateway, Micron, Toshiba
Fair: Acer, Compaq, Hewlett-Packard, Hitachi, IBM, NEC, Windows
Poor: AST, Fujitsu

the business is battling at the bottom end of the price spectrum. There's very little profit in a sub-\$500 computer to be invested in quality engineering and support. So companies that can sell a lot of systems and do a good job of reliability and service are doing something right.

The results sometimes tell you the story you already knew. Here's a shocker: Dell — which has taken over as the leading PC seller

and romps consistently in customer surveys and technical evaluations — comes out with great scores in the magazine evaluations. IBM, Hewlett-Packard and Micron also score consistently near the top of the pack.

But sometimes the scores reveal subtler patterns. Quantex is a growing company that doesn't run splashy television ads, but it scores very well in the analyses from both publishers.

Linux is mostly for the brave

■ Free operating system is crash-resistant, compact — and nothing like Windows.

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Linux rarely crashes, will make even an old Pentium processor seem peppy, requires little disk space and can be downloaded from the Internet for free. So why aren't we all using it? Because Linux is based on Unix, an operating system notorious for arcane commands and difficult installation. Like Microsoft's original operating system, MS-DOS, Unix variants are mostly controlled from command-line, text-based interfaces. Even if you master the intricacies of Linux, a different operating system also requires a different applications. Most programs are

released only in executable form, targeted to just one operating system and hardware platform. Since the vast majority of computers are PCs running Windows variants, most software companies write only for that combination. Consequently, popular application programs, such as Microsoft's Office suite, are not available in Linux.

When used by businesses for running server applications, Linux works well — especially because business already have computer experts on staff to install and troubleshoot. The home user, however, should think carefully before giving up the simple interface of Windows

and the many standard applications it can run. Although similar graphical interfaces and applications exist for Linux, they are different enough to cause consternation among users accustomed to the Windows world. The lack of standard applications will likely keep Linux away from the desks of most office workers as well.

Several moves are afoot to bring Linux to the masses, however. Some distributions, such as those from Red Hat or Caldera, are available with graphical installation systems, installation guides and customer phone support.

On the application front, Corel Corp. of Ottawa, has released its popular WordPerfect word processor for Linux and plans to release its office suite later this year.

Resources

Shareware central

Places to find software you can download free, then pay for the full version. **Shareware.com** (www.shareware.com) — A search engine for finding the program you want. Links take you to sites for free software. **Pass the Shareware** (www.pass-theshareware.com) — A search engine for finding the program you want. Links take you to sites for free software. **Tucows** (www.tucows.com) — Internet programs are grouped according to category, and each has a Tucows rating by the site's guru. **Chris's Download.com** (www.download.com) — A great place for general purpose shareware services.

Software Guide

WinTV 2000

This spy gadget from Hauppauge Computer Works (www.hauppauge.com) is almost too good to be true — a cell phone-size plastic box that plugs into the back of your desktop or laptop and transforms the analog video signal from a full-blown digital TV set. Hauppauge, for years a major supplier of complex computer boards containing TV tuners that are inserted in computer expansion slots, is moving toward providing the same functions by way of the Universal Serial Bus. The USB plug reduces a job that once required

screwdrivers, special grounding wires and other mechanical fuss into a happy plug-and-play exercise not much more complicated than sticking a phone line into a wall connection. You install the software from a CD-ROM and then reboot the computer. You then plug the box into the USB connector and the operating system senses the device and calls up the Hauppauge WinTV2000 video display software. Finally, you plug in a video source anything from a cable box to a VCR's video-audio outputs. The video is displayed in a sizable window that can be moved around the screen. But the display is not as clear as on a regular TV set.

Review by James Coates, Chicago Tribune.

Cell-phone doubt eats at minds of some folks

GANNETT NEWS SERVICE

KEVIN MANEY

Almost every day I pick up a cellular phone, dial a number and hit "send." That turns on the equivalent of a miniature microwave oven, which fires out its powerful radio beams within a few inches of my skull.

I know what a microwave oven does to the inside of a yam. I figure my brain matter is pretty similar stuff. This concerns me.

Now, I realize the issue of whether cellular phone signals cause brain cancer or otherwise damage tissue has come and gone. Lately, it has pretty much disappeared from the media, apparently quelled by research reports that found no direct link.

But the talk goes on. Try asking someone who has a cell phone whether he or she thinks it might be doing some damage. The answer probably will be yes.

In 1993, David Reardon of Florida filed suit against NEC, cellular operator GTE and a phone retailer, saying cell phone use contributed to his late wife's brain cancer. He went on Larry King Live. The issue exploded.

The telecommunications industry poured money into research. Results have been all over the map. Some studies have linked there might be unwholesome effects. Others are inconclusive. Still others have found no effects.

"I came away persuaded there wasn't any evidence for an effect, and that there are lots of flaws in the experiments which seemed to show something," said one Penn State retired head of Bell Labs and now a venture capitalist.

By 1995, however, the issue was diminished and interest faded. But this is all too familiar. Tobacco companies fund research that finds no link between smoking and cancer. Genetic technology companies fund research that shows that electronic commerce is, like, really big. Doctors used to do Camel cigarette ads.

Research takes awhile to get convincing. Action unfolds slowly when it might alter habits we like. Some people feel the cell phone question falls under the category of "information we would prefer not to know."

Which is one reason advanced research results probably wouldn't bring down the cell phone industry. As with smoking, we'll either choose to take the risk or we'll grasp onto minor improvements.

Asked about the cancer question, I got this from communications consultant David Idenberg: "The new digital (phones) are way lower power than the former analog AMPS protocol, which is a win in older cell systems. Less power should be safer. But you can hear in that the echoes of 'Low fat! Low nicotine!'"

Or there's this, from Chris Meyer of Ernst & Young: "If you go to Sweden and Norway, everyone is walking around with little Nokia carpalps inserted and the miles clipped on, carrying the phone in their pockets. This means the action is no longer near your brain and presumably solves the problem."

Fine, unless Sweden and Norway develop a major outbreak of brain cancer. The research continues, though nothing seems to happen. Meantime, we'll keep murmuring about cell phones and cancer at parties and pushing it to the backs of our minds, slitting it in there next to global warming and Y2K.

Kevin Maney is a freelance writer in Rochester. Call him with your thoughts at 252-2388 or e-mail him at kmaney@democratandchronicle.com.